

Final Exit

By Patricia A. Jackson; Illustrated by Chris Gossett

A planet of interminable extremes, Najiba existed in a state of perpetual spring, delineating seasons in terms of electrical disruptions and torrential rainstorms. Ross stared into the maturing squall, intrigued by the erratic veins of lightning which arced across the obscure, night skies. Sheltered beneath his YT-1300 light freighter, the *Kierra*, the Corellian searched the turbulent atmosphere above the open flight pad, following several amorphous shapes that loomed above the heavy cloud cover.

Clipped with military precision, soft spikes of blond hair glistened with the rain as miniature drops accumulated in the longer length above his ears. Yawning, the smuggler leaned against one of the support struts. His sleepy, blue eyes stared from the shadows, regarding several natives who were huddled beneath the storm eaves of Reuther's Wetdock.

"194?"

Pressing the comlink against his cheek, Ross responded, "194."

Alluring, a feminine voice replied, "What's the deal, Ross? We've been sitting here for over an hour."

"Are you bored, darling?" he teased, grinning handsomely in the dim light.

"Do you want an honest answer or just my opinion? Come on, flyboy," she pleaded, "Let's get moving."

"Don't get your circuits in a bunch." Affectionately he brushed a hand over the lower turret wondering in what section of the onboard systems she was hiding. Fondly named after his ship, the feisty droid intelligence had a tendency to focus on the optical sensors, possessed by an unusually feminine curiosity.

"Orval, Ross," a voice greeted from nearby.

Despite the familiarity of the Old Corellian dialect, Ross tensed, casually thumbing the restraint from his blaster. Propping the heavy pistol against the holster, he stared into the closest shadows and focused on the stooped silhouette. "Reuther?"

The aging Najib bartender stepped into the rain, humbled beneath the onslaught of cold drops. Sheltered below the *Kierra*, he straightened, staring into the young Corellian's face.

Vivacious with old world charm, his eyes were discerning and perceptive, contemplating Ross from head to toe. Meeting the smuggler's mischievous eyes, a proud smile played across his lips. "I see where you made the billboards in Mos Eisley last week. The Imperials are offering 5,000 credits for your head."

"Is that all?"

"Indeed," the old man chuckled. "Not nearly enough for a rogue with your credentials." Billowed red sleeves ballooned from Reuther's frail shoulders and arms, clashing with an oversized native tunic. Dampened by the rain, thinning gray hair was tightly braided against his freckled scalp. "It's good to see you, boy," Reuther whispered. Uncorking an intricately carved bottle, he poured a generous portion into a crystal goblet and handed it to the smuggler.

"Corellian whisky?" Ross questioned, sniffing the bitter aroma. "What's the occasion?"

"Growing old," Reuther croaked, nervously glancing over his shoulder, "and to having the strength to face tomorrow."

Suspicious, Ross followed the bartender's anxious eyes. "Quiet night, Reuther?" he asked, cautiously moving a hand to his blaster.



Sadly, the old man shook his head. "This is a desolate place when the Children of Najiba come home."

Familiar with the Children of Najiba, Ross scanned the night skies, well acquainted with the peculiar asteroid belt that had mysteriously claimed an orbit around the small planet. As ominous as the shattered rock moving above their heads, Ross discerned the somber tone of Reuther's voice. "Your message said it was urgent."

Muffled by the warm bodies crowded at the narrow blast door, a strangled scream suddenly erupted from the bar. The despondent cry fluctuated, a cacophony of sobs, which peaked above the violence of the storm.

"Just watch, my boy," Reuther cautioned. "I brought you here for a reason."

The crowd broke ranks, scattering away from the bulkhead frame. A Najib man, wearing the clumsy beige uniform of a port control steward, staggered from the bar, collapsing in the street. Cradled in his arms, he carried the slender, motionless body of a Twi'lek woman. Her pale, blue skin glistened with rain, faultless and smooth despite the cruelty of the shadows. With the delicate poise of a dancer, elegant arms swayed above her head, exaggerating the gentle arch of her neck and shoulders. Scantly clad in a faded tunic, her frail form convulsed in the steward's arms.

"That's Lathaam," Reuther began, "our port official, and that," he hesitated, "that used to be his woman, Arruna."

Ross shrugged the tension from his chest and shoulders, massaging a pinched nerve in his neck. "What happened?"

"Adalric Brandl happened," he replied evenly. "He blew in about 10 hours ago, demanding a ship with a pilot who could shoot as well as fly." Sighing, he added, "Well, you know the rule, Ross. When the Children of Najiba are home, no traffic on or off the planet. Lathaam, being the choob-head he is, made the mistake of informing Brandl of that fact." The anxious Najib rubbed the narrow ridge between his eyes. "Lathaam always did lack diplomacy skills."

"So Brandl killed the girl?"

"I ain't saying what he did." From the safety of the shadows, Reuther watched the lurid scene. Dubious, he averted his eyes, throwing his hands up with exasperation. "Truth is, Ross, Brandl never touched her. Never laid a hand on her," he puffed, "yet there she lies, dead. And there ain't nobody on the planet, not even you, who can tell me Brandl *didn't* do it."

"You've been living with the natives too long."

"I know what you're thinking, boy," Reuther scoffed. "Remember, I was once a bounty hunter, too. Brandl never pulled a blaster. Doesn't even have one." The bartender cleared his throat noisily, spitting into the wind. "His kind don't need blasters to kill."

Shuddering visibly, he mumbled, "He's a 10-96 if I ever saw one."

"A 10-96?" Ross whispered.

"If you don't know, you better look it up," Reuther snorted. "Your life may depend on it."

Ignoring the patriarchal cynicism, Ross crossed his arms over his chest. "Where do I fit into all of this?"

"Brandl wants a pilot who can handle himself. I told him I knew a dozen or more suicide jocks who would come through the asteroids just, to make an easy 1,000 credits ... then I told him about you."

"Come on, Reuther," Ross snorted musically. "One man comes along and has the whole town running scared? Whatever happened to your militia?"

"Is that what it's called?" Reuther scoffed. Staring at the backs of the prying mob, he spat, "Farmers! All of them! Eager to bite every stranger, but afraid of stepping on their own tails. Look at them!" He stared into the small assembly gathered around the body. "It's easy to look into another man's misery and do nothing."

Grumbling among themselves, the crowd abruptly retreated into the street as a shadow moved from the back of the bar. Eclipsing the dim light radiating from the bulkhead, the stranger faltered in the doorway. "That'll be him," Reuther whispered. "I'll pay you 2,000 credits on top of whatever he offers you. Just get him off the planet!" Stepping back into the rain, he hesitated. "There's a bad noise about this one, Ross. Watch yourself."

Captivated by the peculiar events surrounding this outsider, Ross cautiously observed the reaction of the locals as Brandl swept past them, drawing the shadows in his wake. Struck by the unusual beauty of the stranger's face, the smuggler found it difficult to believe that such a man was capable of violence. Handsome, almost cavalier by appearance, Brandl's nose and chin were chiseled with stony nobility, polished by a quiet arrogance that aroused the smuggler's suspicions. Faded laugh lines framed a narrow mouth and thin lips.

Thick, dark waves of hair glistened with rain, interspersed with strands of white, which ran from his temples to the nape of his neck. As foreboding as the shadows of Brandl's face, the robe draped from his shoulders seemed to absorb the darkness about them, concealing any weapons and his hands from view. "Captain Thaddeus Ross?"

Wincing with mention of his first name, Ross brushed his duster aside, revealing his blaster and his hand poised over the heel.

"Adalric Brandl?" he replied curtly.

Cordial, a genteel smile played across Brandl's pale lips, drawing a sharp angle over his prominent cheekbones. "I'll be brief, Captain. I need transport to the Trulalis system."

"Trulalis? You could catch the local skipper for half of what I'm likely to charge. Private transports don't come cheap."

"Integrity comes without price, Captain Ross. The bar owner assured me that you were a man of integrity." Squaring his shoulders, Brandl probed the smuggler's calculating eyes. "I'm offering 5,000 credits for transport to Trulalis, where you will accompany me to the Kovit Settlement."

"I don't leave port for less than 6,000," Ross countered, narrowing his eyes. "If you want company, it'll cost you extra: 1,500 credits."

"Agreed," Brandl whispered. Graceful, his long fingers retrieved a sealed credit chit. "Three thousand now and the rest on completion of my business."

Eyeing the sealed chit, Ross gushed, "Right this way." The smuggler extended his arm toward the freighter's lowered ramp. "Kierra, prepare to raise ship."

"Well it's about time!" she hissed. "I thought my docking struts were going to take root here."

Ross cast a final glance to the bar, saluting Reuther and the others who were watching from the sanctuary of the shadows. Confidently pocketing the credit chit, he flashed a reassuring smile and jogged up the ramp. Initializing the hatch seal, he moved along the familiar corridor toward the flight compartment. The Corellian grinned impishly, listening to Kierra's vindictive voice, as she engaged their peculiar passenger.

"Who the hell are you?" she demanded. "Never mind where I am. I'm where I belong, but you --"

"Kierra," Ross whispered, "meet our new client."

Seething with the brunt of Brandl's initial arrogance, Kierra vehemently blustered, "*Halle metes chun, petchuk!*"

"*Koccic suing!*" Ross scolded, shocked by the scathing Old Corellian insult.

Pleasantly, Brandl returned his thanks for the rude statement and offered a challenge. "*Onna Tulle gush.*"

Before the droid intelligence could recoup for the invitation, Ross glared into one of her optical lenses. "That's enough!" he fired at her. "Open the power coupling and charge the main booster," he ordered. "Now, Kierra!"

Discharge static hissed over the internal comm, similar to the indignant gnashing of teeth. "Affirmative, boss," she replied.

Crossing his arms over his chest, Ross leaned against the interior hull wall, listening for the ignition of the ion engines. Focused on Brandl's insidious eyes, he whispered, "There aren't too many people who remember the Old Corellian dialect."

"In the course of my career, I've had to speak many languages." Cautiously, Brandl added, "I was am ... an actor."

"I don't usually transport passengers," Ross confessed. Stepping through the low bulkhead, he activated the interior corridor lamps. "You're welcome to use my quarters."

Brandl's gaze swept the length of the modest passenger cabin. Hesitant to enter, he paused in the bulkhead frame. "How long until we reach Trulalis?"

"An hour?" Ross shrugged dubiously. "I'll notify you when we arrive."

"Thank you, Captain, your hospitality is appreciated."

"Yeah, I bet it is," the Corellian mumbled under his breath. As the hatch automatically sealed behind him, he retraced his steps to the flight compartment. "Kierra, set the astrogation system for Trulalis."

"Check."

Sitting down in the acceleration chair, Ross quickly glanced over the flight console. "Okay, darling, bring up the emergency autopilot program we installed this morning."

"Not today, Ross," Kierra pouted. "I have a headache." Observing his reaction from several optical lenses, she dampened his fury, whining, "You forgot to cut the restraint servos, flyboy. So don't blame me for the glitch." A hushed snicker translated across the internal comm. "By the way, where'd you dig up the spook? He gives me the chills, Thadd."

"I told you not to call me that!" Ross hissed. Glaring into an optic sensor, he roughly booted the throttle, causing the freighter to shudder and slide on the pad.

"Gently, gently," Kierra cooed. Vexed by his dark mood, she added, "I hate it when you get this way. Your manners --"

"Never mind my manners!" Curbing his temper, he flipped a series of flight switches. The freighter shifted beneath him, resisting the planet's gravity as it rose from the external dock. "You just think about minding your manners," he scolded. Checking the data read-outs for the latest asteroid activity, the Corellian grumbled, "Brandl's paying 8,000 creds for this trip, that's almost half a load of spice. You could at least try to humor him."

"Whatever you say, boss."

"And while I have your attention, run a code check on a 10- 96."

"That's easy. It's listed by Imperial enforcement protocol as a mentally imbalanced person."

"No, there's got to be something more to it," he contemplated. "There must be something else. Research the dead files on all 10-codes with that designation."

"That could take some time."

"Good!" he snapped. "I want every description for a 10-96, every-thing from Imperial databases to Old Republic records."

Resistantly, Kierra replied, "Affirmative, boss."

Accompanied by a low hum, the hyperdrive cue flashed intermittently, recalculating the jump to hyperspace. Checking the on-board systems, Ross observed hyperactivity in the library programs, where Kierra was researching the peculiar 10-code. "Stand by, hyperdrive engaging," he announced, piping into the ship-wide intercom. Bracing himself against the acceleration chair, Ross activated the motivator, propelling himself, his passenger, and his ship into the multicolored explosion of hyperspace.

* * *

In the lower cradle of the ship, Ross sat in the swivel gunner's chair, swinging side to side, absently strumming his fingers against the turret firing controls. He closed his eyes and massaged a muscle spasm in his shoulder, wincing as the clenched tendon tightened then released. Oblivious to the spectacular display of light and color beyond the narrow viewscreen, he relaxed against the cool leather brace, drifting into the serenity of sleep.

"You know," Kierra whispered, "you make the cutest faces when you're asleep."

"I wasn't asleep," he lied, suppressing a yawn.

"Well heads up, flyboy! I have some intriguing data for you."

Ross sat up, rubbing the circulation back into his ears. "Let's hear it."

"Well, it seems that your mysterious 10-96 dates back long before the 10-code setup even existed. Now, according to the description, and I must admit I'm perplexed, the 10-96 came from an Old Corellian word, *ke'dem*."

Staring into the hyperspace vortex, Ross mentally mouthed the word. "Go on."

"Go on?" Kierra snorted. "That's it! Since before the Empire, a 10-96 has had two definitions, an imbalanced person and a *ke'dem*." Hesitant, she whispered, "Now without overinflating your ego ... what's a *ke'dem*?"

"It's a variation of Old Corellian that means condemned or fallen."

"Well that would explain the modern terminology."

"Yeah," he whispered, "it would also explain what happened down there on the planet." The smuggler cupped his hands together, supporting his head and neck. "Kierra, darling, Adalric Brandl is a Jedi Knight."

"A Jedi? That *would* explain a lot of things." Momentarily, her optic sensor dimmed. "Stand by. Hyperdrive about to disengage. Three ... two ... one."

Leaning against the gunner's panic bar, Ross felt the vibration of the ion drives, set to ignite once the transition was complete. "Easy on the drive coils, Kierra."

"Aren't you coming to the bridge?" she asked.

"On my way," he replied, "but first I have to collect our unusual guest."

Blanketed by a protective cloud layer, the planet Trulalis was richly embellished with a spectacular landscape of verdant green. A mosaic of rolling grasslands, sprawling forests, and spacious oceans stood as an invitation to paradise for the space-weary traveler. Crisscrossed and separated at irregular intervals by feral wilderness, Trulalis offered innumerable flat fields for small transports to dock. Ross made a mental note to mark this planet as a potential checkpoint on his smuggling runs. A brief sensor scan pinpointed the closest, suitable landing field. Compensating for the subtle shifts on the ground surface, he set down near a small hamlet.

On the surface, Ross shouldered his travel tote and secured an extra power pack to his holster. From the top of the ramp, he hesitated in the corridor, glimpsing Brandl from the corner of his eye. The eccentric Jedi was waiting for him outside on the trail, shadowed by the towering visage of the black trees. A seemingly invincible statue, the strange man stood with solemn conviction, staring into the hazy silhouette of the late afternoon sun. "Kierra, I'm still not sure what Brandl's up to. Keep your eyes open."

"Keep your comlink open," she replied. "You know how I worry."

"That's my girl," the Corellian chuckled.

Testing the soft earth beneath his boots, Ross strolled up to the familiar silhouette of his passenger. For the first time since leaving Najiba, he noted that both of Brandl's hands were visible, one of them swathed haphazardly in a black bandage. Through gaps in the makeshift dressing, he saw the tender pink of raw flesh and yellow seepage draining into the thick fabric.

Before Ross could question him, Brandl turned and started along the trail. "What did the Najib tell you about me?"

"He said you killed a Twi'lek girl," Ross blurted. After a moment he pressed, "Did you?"

The Jedi's reply was abrupt and forthright. "Yes." Brandl hesitated as the Corellian snorted reprovingly. "Please Captain, your contempt is small reward for a repentant pilgrim."

"You call murder a penance?" Ross spat.

"When it has become the least of one's crimes," the Jedi paused dramatically, "yes."

Brandl's apathy toward the woman's death was chilling, sending shudders throughout the Corellian's body. "How? You never touched her." Ross grasped Brandl's sleeve and pulled. "How did you do it!"

"I asphyxiated her."

"She suffocated? In an open room?"

"A sophisticated talent," Brandl sneered, "not meant for the faint of heart."

"You sound proud of yourself, Jedi!" Ross spat with contempt. "Makes you feel good to kill an innocent woman?"

"Evil springs from weakness and weakness from ambition; by this grand order every ambitious man is undone!" Deliberately, the Jedi challenged, "Tell me, Captain, you too are an ambitious man. Which of us is truly innocent?"

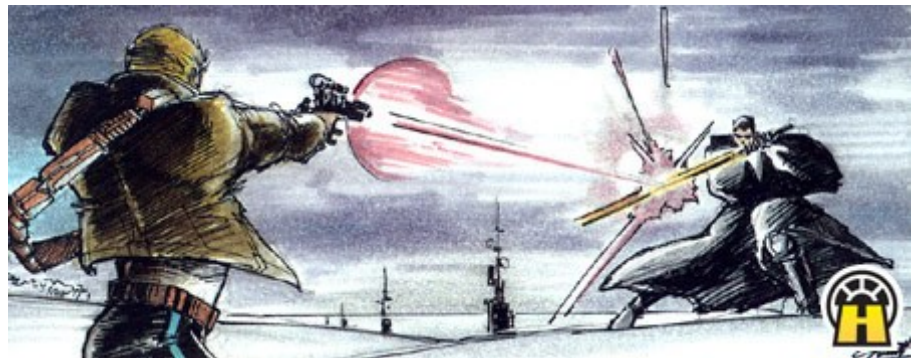
"Should I applaud now!" Ross taunted.

"If you wish!"

"Well before I hand over your accolades, tell me something. Was that a real line or just something you made up to ease your conscience?"

Petulant with the smuggler's indignation, Brandl turned on him. "If it's retribution you wish for me, Captain Ross, then I suggest you stay close at hand." Scowling furiously, he stared down his long nose. "You may yet have your satisfaction."

Provoked by the sinister edge in Brandl's voice, Ross drew his blaster. The Jedi apparently heard him, and spun around to face the blaster. Ross fired a three-round burst at the Jedi. Honed by several seasons as a bounty hunter, he centered the bolts to explode in the square of Brandl's broad shoulders. Before the deadly energy could land their mark, Brandl deftly snatched a cylindrical object from his belt. Momentarily, a narrow shaft of white brilliance ignited from the base, feinting and parrying with the precise motions of the Jedi's wrists. Deflected by the lightsaber, the blaster bolts were harmlessly shot off into the field.



Aghast, Ross could only watch as the destructive rounds dissipated into oblivion. Abruptly, he felt the crushing pinch of invisible fingers clenched against his throat, constricting his airway and lungs. Choking, the smuggler dropped to his knees as the serene landscape of Trulalis blurred before him. Gradually, the sensation faded, leaving the Corellian gasping to catch his breath.

"There is one rule of theater that applies to real life, Captain Ross," Brandl declared. "*Only heroes die*. Villains and cowards are left to suffer." Turning his back on the panting pilot, he snarled, "Now come along."

Ross shook the haze from his vision. "Is that another line?" he slurred lethargically.

Brandl trembled, visibly drained as he disengaged the lightsaber with required effort. "Not just a line, Captain, but an astute warning to the less-than-humble pilgrim." Securing the lightsaber to his belt, the Jedi momentarily scanned the pale skies. "The settlement is less than a kilometer away. We had best move along. It will be dark soon."

Swearing off bruises, Ross bitterly wedged his pack against his shoulder and jammed his blaster into the holster. Quickly brushing past Brandl, he hissed, "Can't imagine why you'd be afraid of the dark."

Nestled within the dominant embrace of a mountain range, Kovit was well-protected from the harsh weather conditions of the northern highlands and the wind-swept plains of the coastal region. Staring down the mound into the modest farming community, Ross could vaguely discern movement in the dusty streets. Drawn by diminutive banthas, wagons creaked through the wide avenues. Dozens of people walked the streets, pausing to chat with a neighbor or to haggle over the local street merchant's wares. From a side alley, three boys grunted and sweated behind a battered landspeeder, coaxing the vehicle's engines to briefly ignite. Nearby,

above the sporadic choke of the repulsorcraft, laughter betrayed a trio of children playing with an obsolete astromech droid.

Brandl hesitated at the crest of the mound, staring down into the settlement, as if reconsidering his options. Wilted, the Jedi's shoulders exposed a reluctance to continue. "Where are you from, Captain Ross?"

Startled by the abrupt question, Ross stammered, "Corellia originally."

"Do you find returning there difficult?"

"Homecomings are always hard." The Corellian shrugged, pursing his lips doubtfully. "At least for some of us."

Without further reply, Brandl continued down the trail, deliberately slowing his stride. Vacillating, he stepped through the settlement gates, as if expecting some invisible force field to bar his path. Nostalgically passing through the prudent rows of farm cottages, the Jedi admired the mastery of native architecture, as sculpted from the indigenous lumber. Herb gardens and prized flower beds adorned the private lawns, each tenderly manicured and maintained with fastidious care. As they approached the dry, dusty oval of the settlement common, Brandl covered his eyes, protecting them from the fading sun, as he stared into the rich, agricultural outback of the settlement, which extended far beyond the limits of the community to the base of the mountains themselves.

From the near center of Kovit, a macabre specter of architecture loomed above the rustic rooftops. Flyaway buttresses supported the main construction of the theater, unfurling like stony wings from the base. Packed with chalk-white limestone, the obelisk was unequivocally straight, seeming to elongate into the obscuring skies. Established intentionally in the heart of the settlement, the theater captured the waning rays of the sun, momentarily stealing the glory from the picturesque village. There was a somber sense of belonging that drew Brandl toward the structure, ignoring the startled glares of the settlement denizens.

As they passed through the outskirts of the community, Ross nervously observed a makeshift hangar and the crude snout of a Z-95 jutting from the narrow bay doors. The starfighter appeared operational, though crowded by its diminutive shelter, and eager for a skirmish. Distracted by the presence of strangers, several men gathered just beyond the shadows of the small livery, watching intently.

Thumbing the restraint from his blaster, Ross cautiously whispered, "Your adoring fans?"

"Neighbors, patrons, old friends." Brandl abruptly paused in the street, as if awakening from an illusion. "But that was another lifetime."

"Where do they stand in this lifetime?" the smuggler growled.

"Strangers."

Weaving through the haze of the fragrant gardens surrounding the theater courtyard, a woman and a young boy moved along the grainy, stone paths. The echo of their voices chimed with laughter as a private joke was shared between them. Brandl watched intently as they walked through the haze and into the dusty streets.

Fiery, auburn spirals cascaded from the woman's head, crowning her oval face. Unusually pale skin flushed in the faded brilliance, betraying an aversion to excessive sunlight. Tall but gangly, the boy was no older than 11 or 12 years. Broad shoulders framed his upper torso, seemingly too heavy for his slender form. Coordinated and rhythmic, his long legs showed nothing less than the promise of sharp, steady growth.

Startled by the dark apparition of Brandl, the woman hesitated and stood motionless in the street, meeting the Jedi's friendless eyes. .

The smile parting her full lips was quickly forgotten. Puzzled by her peculiar behavior, the child swept his gaze from her stony face to



Brandl. Registering nothing more than a stranger, the boy leaned over his mother's arm and whispered something in her ear.

Obviously distraught, she pulled the child snugly against her and hurriedly continued their trek across the common. Brandl sighed remorsefully, then without explanation, resumed his walk toward the old theater. Beyond the archaic gate a decade or more of wild flowers had claimed the inner recesses of the theater yard, staggering the once straight path to the massive bulkhead doors. Residing over the darkened antechamber, bronze statues and sculpted metalwork lined the interior corridor.

Adalric Brandl moved gracefully into these familiar shadows, intuitively stalking the darkened corridors and spacious hallways beyond. The hollow shell of his memories traced the outlines and silhouettes of each molded tapestry, a display case of tarnished prop swords and shields, and finally the grand hall, where past audiences had come to experience the stage productions.

Ignoring the Corellian behind him, Brandl quickened his steps, moving into the immense auditorium. Deafening, the familiar resonating of applause and encouragement thundered and echoed inside his ears; but this illusion was short-lived. There was no audience to applaud, no actors to bow, no stage settings, nor props as he remembered them. The yawning mouth of the stage was disgracefully bare.

"Who is there?" a voice whispered from the darkness.

Brandl faltered, supporting himself in the elaborately carved doorway.

A thin, frail figure emerged from the darkness of the inner aisle. "Come closer," he gently commanded.

From the shadows along the back wall, Ross scanned the theater for other signs of movement. Thumbing the restraint from his blaster, he waited quietly in the musty wings of the chamber as Brandl continued into the hall toward the shadowy form.

"Adalric Brandl, is that you?" the old man croaked pleasantly.

"Master Otias," Brandl whispered, kneeling at his mentor's feet. "I am ashamed that you care to remember me."

Otias ignited a glow rod, casting a warm beam of light across his scaling face. He was dressed in a faded gray tunic, stained with lamp oil and sweat. The veins and muscles of his arms were pronounced and defined, built up from a lifetime of toil and lean with age. Clouded gray eyes were nearly imperceptible against a splash of dark spots and freckles. "Since when did shame ever come between an actor and his task director?" Brushing a trembling hand through his thinning silver mane, Otias whispered, "It's been 12 long years, Adalric. What brings you back to this stage?"

"Master O--" Brandl fell silent, cutting himself short.

"Come, come lad ... there is nothing more obvious than an actor with a need to confess."

Abruptly, Brandl cowered beneath the glow rod. "I ... I live my life ... in a whirlwind!"

Dignified, Otias beamed proudly, recognizing the famous line. "Old Soveryn's final words of the fourth act. How closely you've come to rivalling his life." Resigned, the aging taskmaster sighed, a lifetime of exhaustion evident by his labored breathing. "Actors are granted license to live a thousand lives, Adalric; but you, you chose to live a thousand lies. If you have come to me as your advocate then speak from your heart, not from the void of a tragic character who has never been born."

Spittle flying from the corners of his mouth, Brandl raged, "I cannot!"

"Every tragic figure is tainted by a flaw, possessed by a need to save the world or himself from some unpardonable crime. No man can set himself before humanity and



judge it, not without himself being judged." Otias gently unwrapped the makeshift bandage swathed about on Brandl's left hand, wincing at the severity of the burn. The lightsaber's cauterizing bite was undeniable. "When we pursue shadows, we are destined to find the darkness." Staring into Brandl's face, Otias whispered, "And as you well know, the dark side has always had its price."

"What happened to me?" Brandl, implored.

"You stared into the collective pith of all beings and judged it, without first looking into your own heart. Frustrated, you went looking for the tragic flaw without much success. When the Emperor came calling, you couldn't resist!" Otias whispered, "No one knows darkness better than a Jedi Knight, and no one was more suited to play such a role than you."

"I killed a woman!" Brandl gasped. "Suffocated her! I could feel her heart in my hand ... in my mind! And I squeezed and squeezed --"

"You've killed many," Otias accused. "The Emperor has no blood on his hands; but he keeps an army of others who do."

"Otias, please, help me find the way."

"The way of the Force brings balance to the anarchy of life; but you Adalric," he shook his head reprovingly, "you didn't want balance. Your pride was so great and despite my warnings, you went in search of the unalienable crime, which inevitably separates the hero from the indigent masses. And you found it, didn't you?"

Gasping for breath, Brandl croaked, "Yes! It was within me, within my black heart the whole time."

"It lies within all of us," Otias whispered, "if we dare to see." Exhausted, he sighed bitterly, again brushing a hand through his thinning hair. "I cannot vindicate you of the evil that you have brought upon yourself, an evil that you have wielded in the name of the Emperor for so long. I've spent the last decade watching, waiting for your return, rehearsing what I would say to you." Sadly, he whispered, "What you ask, I cannot give you. There can be no redemption for your crimes. The dead cannot forgive." Extinguishing the lamp, Otias turned his back on the distraught Jedi and moved away toward the stage.

Brandl slowly turned from the familiar silhouette, stung by the reality of Otias's words. Pressing the damp bandage against his wounded palm, he stepped into the outer arena, moving into the darkened wings in the rear of the theater. Without comment, he retraced his steps through the spacious corridors, past the archaic displays, and into the courtyard beyond the doors. Steeling himself against the violent images sparking through his mind, the Jedi surrendered to Trulalis's last waning sunlight, imagining that the impotent rays had the power to burn into his flesh.

Angrily, he fumbled beneath his robes, producing a large cylindrical object. Ross flinched momentarily, traumatized by his encounter with the Jedi's lightsaber. With recovering confidence, he noted that this object was much larger and was covered with minute control levers and data screens. As if wrenching the neck of an invisible foe, Brandl twisted the object before replacing it within his robes. Lightly, he heard the smuggler's footsteps behind him, moving with guarded discretion, as if to avoid disturbing his troubled thoughts. "I prefer your contempt, Captain," he whispered, his eyes flashing with violence. "Your pity disgusts me." Extending his long stride, he stormed out of the theater yard, unhindered by the thickened dust at his feet.

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Framed by the dark cowl of the forest canopy, the *Kierra*'s ivory hull gleamed, a smooth, round tooth jutting from the heath. Guided by these moonlight reflections, Ross stumbled through the rutted trail, twisting his ankles against unseen rocks. "Kierra, lights!"

Squinting into the brilliant array of search beacons, the smuggler shivered, pulling the collar of his duster across his neck. A potent wind was descending from the high country, bringing with it the promise of rain. Inside the ramp corridor, Ross brushed a hand through his hair, reassured by the warmth flooding the freighter's interior. "Pump up the main boosters," he ordered with distraction, noting that Brandl had not followed him onto the ship.

Growing accustomed to the Jedi's erratic mood swings, Ross peered from the protection of the ramp door. Below him, standing at the foot of the ramp, Brandl stood motionless staring into the darkness as pale mists crawled over his shoulders and beneath his feet. "Brandl?" With his smuggler's sense aroused, Ross ordered, "Kierra, kill the exterior lamps."

"You can come out now," Brandl whispered, as the austere beacons were extinguished. "No one will harm you."

Ross pressed himself against the interior hull wall, propping his blaster and steadying his arm and shoulder to draw a clear shot. Hearing him, Brandl stared up into the darkened passage, disarming the Corellian with his sharp gaze. As the lanky figure of a boy emerged from the heath, Ross could feel the tension fade and stepped off the ramp, recognizing the child from their brief encounter in the settlement. Dressed in dark green clothes to match the forest at night, the child's face was flushed and sweated. Cautiously, he approached the two men and the freighter.

Awed by the sight of Brandl, enshrouded by darkness, yet haloed by the moon, the child moved gingerly toward the ship, compelled by an insatiable curiosity. He made no effort to shield his wonder, noting every measure of the figure before his eyes, as if committing his mere presence to memory. "It's true," the boy whispered. "You are a Jedi Knight."

"Who are you?" Brandl demanded, but there was no strength in words. Even Ross could detect the half lie of denial trembling in his voice.

Handsome, the child grinned, turning his face up to meet his father's eyes. "Don't you know me?" he asked. Staring intently at the lightsaber swinging from the Jedi's belt, the boy angrily cried, "You named me! Jaalib, remember?" Recovering his manners, he rubbed the toe of his shoe into the yielding earth. "My last name is Brandl too."

Gently, Brandl caressed the boy's hair and cheeks, feeling the smooth skin beneath his fingertips. It was a peculiar sensation, which fired every nerve across his body. Despite the tenderness of that caress, Ross felt a sense of unease crawling into his belly.

"Is that a real lightsaber? I've never seen one." Chatty, the youngster added, "I've seen props for the stage, but ..." His soft, tenor voice fluttered, prey to the silence as Brandl handed the weapon to him. Staring at it, Jaalib reached hesitantly for the lightsaber, then dropped his hand.

"Don't be afraid," Brandl urged.

"I'm not afraid," Jaalib said with confidence, taking his father's hand, rather than the lightsaber. A thin film of tears glistened in the corner of his eyes. Swallowing the emotion, Jaalib whispered, "I've come to warn you. I heard Menges and the others talking. They're angry that you came back to the settlement. Mother doesn't think they'll do anything; but I know that Menges has a ship."

Overhearing the boy, Ross snapped, "Kierra, check the sensors!"

Abruptly, the interior corridor lights went dark. "I suggest that you all duck!"

A tremendous explosion erupted near the aft of the ship and forest perimeter, accompanied by the afterburn blast of an outgoing starfighter. Dodging churned up roots, debris, and stone particles, Ross slid under the ramp, diving for cover beneath the freighter's hull. Sparks and molten debris scattered about his head and shoulders, singeing his clothing and hair. Thrashing wildly, he swiped the heated material from his skin. Nearby, Brandl was helping the frightened boy to his feet, whispering encouraging words to the traumatized child.

"Damage report."

"They got us, boss," Kierra pined. "Concussion missile." There was a brief pause as she analyzed the incoming data. "Shields are out. Engines are at 70 percent. There's a good chance the ion coils may seize if we push them too far."

"Can we lift off?"

"With you at the reins, flyboy," she chuckled, "anything's possible."

Protectively embracing the boy against him, Brandl whispered, "As long as we don't make ourselves known, he will pass."

"Look," Ross barked, "this is all very touching, but that last pass was just to get an approximate location. Next time --" he snorted anxiously, "forget it, I'm not waiting around for next time. Let's scratch gravel, now!"

Agitated by the sudden turn of events, Brandl cupped the boy's face in his hands. "Does your mother know you're here?"

"No."

"Then ..." Brandl stammered, "how did you know?"

Playfully holding his father's hands, Jaalib smiled, "Otias told me the truth a long time ago. He let me watch the holos of your stage work. Mother didn't like it at first, but she came with me and she cried the whole time." Sadly, the boy glanced away, avoiding Brandl's eyes. "When we saw you in the settlement common, as soon as we got home she started to cry. So I knew it was you." Staring at Ross, the boy frowned, knowing the inevitable parting was soon at hand. "Will you ever come home?"

Brandl cradled Jaalib's smooth cheeks and gently kissed the child's forehead. "I can make no promises."

Jaalib forced a smile. "I understand. Otias said that you had other important roles to play, parts that a small world like Trulalis could never offer." Clinging to his father's presence, the boy whispered, "When I'm old enough, I'm going to act offworld too. Otias said that he would help." He hesitated. "I want to be as great as you are, father." The thin film of tears returned, threatening to spill over his cheeks. "I won't ever forget you." Using the thick canopy of the forest as a shield, Jaalib sprinted down the trail and vanished into the night shadows.

"They never told him the truth," Brandl swallowed desperately, fighting back his emotions.

"Why didn't you tell him?" Ross snarled, sealing the outer hatch.

"You give me credit for courage? A man of courage is a man of conviction, Captain Ross." Brushing past the Corellian, the Jedi whispered, "I lost mine the moment I chose to believe in old legends."

Throwing himself into the acceleration seat, Ross frantically began throwing the flight controls. His hands moved diligently across the console with consummate skill. Roused by the threat of a hostile starfighter swinging in on the sensor scope, he initialized the booster ignition, cradling the crippled ship in his hands. A low whine engulfed the flight cabin in static echoes and vibrations as the ion drive labored to lift the freighter. The metallic rattle of the deck plates reverberated through every corridor and in the spacious cargo bay.

"Oh," Kierra groaned, "that sounds bad."

"Never mind how it sounds, get started on bringing the shield generators on line!" Struggling to maintain control of the freighter, Ross brawled with the partially ionized throttle, maximizing the power output through the damaged engine.

"The hard part will be getting through the atmosphere," Brandl whispered, glancing over the readout screens.

"We may never get off the ground!" Ross grumbled. "Kierra, where is he?"

"One Z-95 Headhunter, headed right for us and according to my readings, the ship exceeds the normal weight ratio for its class."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning more concussion missiles. He's fully loaded."

"Power up the main sentry turret," Ross mumbled, concentrating on the hampered freighter. "When will the shield generator come online?"

"Give me five more minutes. Hydraulic pressure is building to functional levels."

"Well hurry it along. At this rate, we won't even get into space before he catches us." Ross stared into the underlying blanket of the lower atmosphere, shrouding his departure in the frenzy of night mist. "What can you do about fixing the ion drive?"

"Think happy thoughts," Kierra replied. "We have no cargo. We have no surplus material. And," she added with a hint of feminine pride, "this ship has always been under its weight ratio. We're lighter than a Gamorrean brain sack."

"How long before he intercepts us?"

"Let's just say I'm putting up the shields now."

Abruptly, the modified light freighter shook with the impact concussion of another direct hit. Bucking beneath the powerful blow, the *Kierra* drifted beneath the cloud cover as the destructive energy ricocheted over the aft shields, dissipating harmlessly against the hull.

"Damage?" Ross panted.

"The shields took it," Kierra replied wearily, still accessing the information from her multiple systems. "But the hydraulic level is already dropping. We won't survive much more of that."

Angling across the stratosphere, the Headhunter aggressively continued its pursuit. Hampered by the thickened atmosphere of Trulalis, it swayed from side to side, approaching for another strafing run.

Arming the lower turret, Kierra interfaced with the sentry gun, timing a sporadic burst across the forefront of the attacking ship. Not expecting retaliation from the crippled freighter, the fighter stuttered through the atmosphere, its left wing section erupting into flames. Avoiding the turret's deadly accuracy, the Z-95 dropped back, barreling out of range. "That should keep his head down for a while."

"Not long enough," Ross argued. Eluding Brandl's cautious eye, he grumbled, "If there's something in your Jedi survival book, now's the time to spring it."

Brandl nodded, his face notably drained and haggard. Reaching inside the fold of his robe, he again produced the peculiar capsule. The cylindrical-shaped device was cleverly fitted for concealment as a hydrosponder or mechanic's tool. Staring at the object, Ross recognized it from their brief excursion at the theater. As he watched, fascinated, the control head flashed intermittently from a hidden power cell.

"What's that?" Kierra crooned. Intrigued by the odd unit, her optical orb brightened, extending the focus on the transmitter.

"It's a transponder," Brandl replied. "And it's been transmitting for nearly an hour." The Jedi sighed with effort, leaning against the broad back of the acceleration chair. In the harsh light of the flight cabin, his arrogance could not hide the gaunt cheeks and stress lines that had begun eroding the handsome visage of a once proud man. The morbid signs of resignation and surrender were easily read in his noble face.

Without warning, the Headhunter broke off the chase, banking sharply toward the planet. Its aft engines betrayed haste, glowing with the throttle thrown full open as the fighter vanished into the dense cloud cover above the planet. Suspicious, Ross glared at Brandl, feeling the constriction of fear in his throat. "What's the catch?"

"You had better prepare yourself," Brandl whispered.

The proximity alarms blared, sending a deafening echo into the freighter's corridor and accessways. Exploding with tactical data and imminent warnings of ship-to-ship collision, the sensors closed on the gigantic structure of the massive Imperial Star Destroyer, newly emerged from hyperspace.

As the Star Destroyer moved across the viewscreen only a scant 100 meters from him, Ross slumped against the back of his chair, defeated before one shot could be fired. Slowly, scores of turbolaser batteries turned on them, targeting his freighter. Still hampered by a faulty ion drive, the *Kierra* bucked and lurched toward the Star Destroyer.

"Have they got us?" Ross moaned, massaging his eyes and fore-head.

Kierra snickered nervously. "Does Boba Fett enjoy his job?"

"Could we outrun them?"

"We couldn't even out-think them at this point, flyboy. They've got us locked in tight."

Resting his head and arms against the flight console, Ross sighed, accepting the inevitable. "You've managed to sign my death warrant!"

"On the contrary, I've guaranteed your reprieve." The Jedi's mouth hinted at a sly grin.

"I have a price on my head! An Imperial bounty!"

"You are about to discover that the Emperor is quite generous, especially when one of his citizens sees fit to return his property."

"You're one of the Emperor's freaks?" Ross argued. "What were you doing on Najiba ... You were running!" Staring at the Imperial Star Destroyer, he gasped, "You were running from the Empire? Why?"

"It no longer matters," Brandl whispered. "The time has come to confront the darkness and forsake it for what it is ... just so many shadows."

"Well some shadows can kill!"

As they passed into the outer docking field, the freighter was engulfed in darkness. "Then let all be perfected in death."

Prying the forward deck plate from the flight console, Ross quickly unbuckled his blaster, stashing the belt inside with a hidden cache of thermal detonators and other illegal weaponry. Motivated by Imperial penalties for unauthorized equipment and arms, he retreated to a general utility closet in the corridor beyond the command cabin. Retrieving a small stash of blaster power packs, the flustered Corellian returned to the bridge to find Brandl peering curiously into the hidden compartment. "Kierra, make certain the shield housing is intact. I don't want them finding your power cell."

"A girl's got to have her privacy," she quipped. "Good thinking, boss."

Closing the hidden panel, Ross tripped the contamination seal. If the Imperial sensors went over the ship, they would bypass this area for contaminated mechanic's tools. Abruptly, the interior lights fluctuated as the power levels dropped, shifting to auxiliary mode. "All clear," Ross hollered.

"I've switched over my power couplings to a subordinate cell. Even if they do find my main generator, they won't know what it is. But," she teased, "that means I can't eavesdrop over the comlink or scan the perimeter!"

"For your own safety," Brandl began, "I advise you not to mention Trulalis."

Remembering Brandl's wife and son back on the planet, Ross nodded pensively. "Kierra, sweep all records and logs since we left Najiba, input data from a previous job. Where does that put us?"

"We dropped that baby tris off on Tatooine, remember?"

"Don't remind me," Ross replied wistfully. "Just erase the reasons and submit an addendum about engine trouble above Trulalis."

"Right, boss."

"And Kierra? Lose yourself. They'll probably go over every centimeter of this ship."

"Is that a hint of concern in your voice, flyboy?"

"Yeah," he grumbled. Shrugging the tension menacing his shoulders, he walked through the corridor to the hatch and deactivated the seal.

Before the ramp could fully lower two Imperial stormtroopers charged aboard the ship, leveling their weapons at Ross, shoving him against the hull wall. The force of the blow knocked the wind from his lungs and the Corellian doubled over, coughing desperately to catch his breath. Twenty or more stormtroopers were staggered outside the freighter, their weapons pointing into the ramp lift, trained on the dark Jedi.

Undaunted by the show of Imperial might, Brandl scanned the parade of white-on-black armor, until he met the familiar face of an Imperial officer beyond the periphery of armed soldiers. Stepping aside, the Jedi allowed three stormtroopers to rush past him into the ship.

"I trust you will cooperate," the officer announced. Pompously, he adjusted the brim of his black cap. "If not for your own sake, then for the sake of your companion."

Disguising a hint of defeatism with dramatic poise, the Jedi proclaimed, "How can I cooperate?"

"Think nothing. Do nothing. Say nothing until you are told."

Offering a hand to the panting smuggler, Brandl grinned slyly, his back to the Imperial entourage. "Captain Grendahl, you'll find that I do nothing very well."

Grendahl's face was menacing. "We're scheduled to rendezvous with the *Interrogator* within the hour. Inquisitor Tremayne is eager to see you again, Lord Brandl ... very eager." Pointing to Ross, Grendahl demanded, "Take

him to the isolation area for questioning." Changing his demure with obvious fraudulence, Grendahl tipped his hat with mocking respect, "Please, Lord Brandl, your quarters have been prepared."

* * *

Massaging the bruises swelling on his chest and arms, Ross leaned his head against the antiseptically clean wall of the holding cell. Several hours had slowly passed, marked with isolated sessions of routine questioning. Abruptly, the door opened, admitting two stormtroopers and Captain Grendahl, who he recognized from the hangar bay. Pleasantly, the Imperial officer sat down across from him, setting a large datapad on the table between them. "Do you recognize this gentleman?" he asked, keying up a picture on the small screen.

Ross laughed softly, recognizing the distinguished curves of his own face. "Would it help if I said I didn't?"

Grendahl smiled generously. "No." Folding his hands against the table top, he sneered, "Interfering with an Imperial investigation is a crime punishable with imprisonment."

"An Imperial investigation?" Ross jeered. "It was a fight, and not a fair one," he argued. "Two stormtroopers against a Jawa, come on!"

"Never mind the odds," Grendahl replied evenly. "You still interfered; however ..."

"However?" the Corellian scoffed, mocking the insipid officer.

"However, I am authorized to extend a generous amnesty if you will cooperate and answer a few questions."

"Amnesty?" Ross chuckled. He scratched his head, agitated. "Imperial amnesty is about as valuable as a Wookiee dwarf with no hair."

Grendahl frowned, covering his dismay with shrewd professionalism. "You have the Emperor's guarantee, Captain Ross. Help us with one short investigation and you will be cleared of all charges."

Stalling, Ross demanded, "He owes me money!"

"I can't promise you will get it," Grendahl countered, "but you are entitled to 10,000 credits." Grinning malevolently, he watched the smuggler's startled reaction. "That's 10% of the bounty offered for Brandl's safe return."

Intrigued, Ross leaned over the edge of table. "You mean to say Brandl's worth 100,000 credits?"

Anxious to keep the smuggler's attention, Grendahl silently acknowledged the query. "You're lucky to even be alive, Captain Ross. Adalric Brandl is highly unstable, capable of inconceivable atrocities. However, his value to the Emperor makes him an essential resource. Where did you find him?"

"Najiba."

Grendahl's face darkened, perplexed. "Najiba has stringent ordinances restricting traffic through the asteroid belt."

"By the time I got there," Ross explained, "no one cared about port control penalties. They just wanted him off the planet."

"Was there trouble? Was anyone harmed?"

The Corellian shrugged casually. "I never left my ship," he lied, "so I can't really say."

"And where were you going?"

"Mos Eisley, but," Ross laughed, "considering my last visit, I only planned to take him as far as Anchorhead. After that, he was on his own."

"Did he ever mention his connection with the Emperor?"

"Not until you had us in the tractor beam."

"The damage to your ship?"

"We were attacked by pirates," Ross replied rhythmically. "My hyperdrive failed and we just barely managed to arrive here."

Grendahl hesitated. "You keep accurate ship records, Captain Ross. Your flight log and manifests substantiate your story."

"Call it a throwback to my bounty hunting days," Ross offered. "If you wanted your expenses, exact documentation was a necessity."

Tentatively peering into the room, a junior-grade lieutenant saluted Grendahl, ignoring the prisoner with him. "Captain Grendahl, sir, Admiral Etnam requests your presence on the bridge immediately, sir. Lord Brandl has been given the task of escorting the civilian to his ship."

"What!"

Ross concealed a sly grin behind the collar of his duster. Feigning surprise, he rose from the chair and leaned against the glossy table, pondering how Brandl managed to arrange this escort.

"Captain Grendahl," the lieutenant whispered, appalled by the outburst. "Admiral Etnam's instructions were quite specific. He is anxious to rendezvous with High Inquisitor Tremayne." Being Etnam's personal aide and fearing no reprisals from Grendahl, he nodded to the nearest stormtrooper and whispered, "Retrieve the prisoner."

Grendahl struggled to retain his composure, chafed by Brandl's influence, which despite his moment of dishonor to the Emperor, still held weight, even with the intrepid character of Admiral Etnam. Nostrils flared, he hissed between grit teeth, "Very well." Then to re-establish his ego in the company of those under his command, he straightened his hunched shoulders, erasing the sour scowl from his face. "You're free to go, Captain Ross," he growled. "The Emperor's clemency can be bountiful and far-reaching; but the next time you meddle with an Imperial investigation," he paused, "you may find yourself at the wrong end of Imperial justice." Folding his hands behind his back, Grendahl started up the corridor. "Remember that the next time you consider beating the odds."

Over the polished shoulders of several stormtroopers, Brandl watched Grendahl's retreating back. Sneering behind the Imperial officer, the Jedi sniffed disdainfully as he led the smuggler into the corridor. "Are you a superstitious man, Captain Ross?"

Preoccupied by the armed escort behind them, Ross whispered, "My grandfather used to say that superstition was the foundation of a weak mind."

"Then we are surely doomed, for the basis of our civilization lays in the hands of high priests, shamans, and monks." Brandl laughed with genuine good nature. There was a spark of emotion betrayed by the brilliance of his eyes and Ross noted the deepening of the laugh lines framing his mouth. Adalric Brandl was in good spirit. "Your grandfather was a wise man."

Ross shrugged off the compliment. "Just another smuggler who found himself on the wrong end of Imperial justice." He sniffed, recalling Grendahl's threat. "That's why I became a bounty hunter, hoping to avoid what happened to him."

"And then?"

"And then I got bored. Guess it wasn't meant to be."

"We spend nearly the whole of our lives searching for the appropriate role that will mark the end of our existence with some moment of glory, ignoring the fact that fame and reputation are but mere perfumes of virtue. They never last."

"Is that another line?" Ross teased.

"Acting is a profound education in human nature and that is why I became so obsessed; but as my intellect improved, my morals failed and I became the very thing I most despised."



"And what was that?"

"Human. I was not a king, not a hero, not a god. Just a man trapped in the passion of the play."

"So what happens now?" Ross probed.

"My life has been one continuous drama," Brandl whispered, "a tragic one, I'm afraid. And I have stumbled through it, scene by scene, act by act, like some terrified neophyte. Tonight, Fortune calls for the final exit. I can no longer live the lie."

"You're going back to the Emperor, aren't you? After what he's done to you?"

"He did nothing but point in a general direction. I chose to go and do his bidding."

"What about your family? Your boy? What if the Emperor ever found out?"

"I assure you; no harm will befall them." Euphorically, he sighed, "They will be safe."

Ross believed him. There was a certainty about the Jedi that went beyond the sinister shadows that had once kept the two men at odds with each other. But the smuggler's conscience demanded a bit more for security. "How can you be sure?"

"I've never been more certain in my life." Placing a credit chit in the smuggler's hand, he closed Ross's fingers over it. Ross noticed another object in Brandl's hand, one which the Jedi tried to conceal when he folded his hands together over it. "The chit is the remainder of what I owe you and the Emperor's compulsory fee for capturing a dangerous renegade." He grinned malevolently, amused by his own sarcasm.

Slipping the chit in his duster pocket, Ross noticed the spherical, metallic shape beneath Brandl's hands, and noted the raspy acid eraser etched into the explosive where the serial trace markers had been removed. Eyes wild with the revelation, he stared into Brandl's tranquil face.

"Consider all debts paid," the Jedi whispered. Turning curtly on his heels, he retreated in the hangar corridor with the escort in tow.

Ross hurried up the ramp, rushing to seal the corridor hatch. "Kierra!" he hissed, sprinting through the access tunnel into the flight cabin. "Kierra, wake up!"

"What do you mean wake up!" she snapped. "The engines have been online and waiting for the last hour. I even managed to knock one of the ion coils in place by popping the shield housing." She snorted, causing an erratic hiccup over the comm. "What's the rush? The main databanks were clean and according to this little astromech they had on board --"

"Never mind!" Ross shouted, strapping himself into the acceleration chair. "Brandl has one of my thermal detonators and I think he plans to --"

A muffled explosion reverberated through the docking corridors, blowing smoke and debris into the auxiliary bay. Piercing, high-pitched alarms began to blare, alerting medics and technicians to the area. Amid the chaos of shouting voices, the klaxons, and the sound of armored feet rushing to secure the area, the *Kierra* momentarily hovered above the flight pad. Several smaller explosions echoed from the passage, rattling TIE fighters and shuttle craft in the nearby racks.

Bewildered, Kierra gasped, "What would ever possess him to pull such a stunt?"

"He had to protect his family," the smuggler replied wearily.

"But with him dead, there's no guarantee the Empire won't find them. Then again," she mused aloud, "there's no guarantee the Empire will even look for them." Flustered by the infinite innuendoes, she quipped, "I'm just glad it's over."

"But it's not," he whispered. Banking sharply over an array of TIE fighters and ejector racks, Ross guided the *Kierra* out of the launch bay, repeatedly throttling the labored engines. "Brandl might have made his final exit; but the play is far from over ... for us ... or his family." The Corellian grinned nostalgically. Mesmerized by the verdant face of Trulalis, he watched the planet rotate before him, physically unmarred, innocently unaware, momentarily unchanged. He sighed, his smuggler's sense oddly at peace. There were no more shadows.

Casually resetting the astrogation system for Najiba, he braced himself as the *Kierra* stuttered across the open void and then vanished into the translucent brilliance of hyperspace.